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Intellectual History

Felix Kaufmann and the Merging of Traditions

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by **Ádám Tamás Tuboly**

In 2015, Robert S. Cohen and Ingeborg K. Helling edited Felix Kaufmann's *Die Methodenlehre der Sozialwissenschaften* as *Theory and Method in the Social Sciences*. Kaufmann's book, originally published in German in 1936, at the peak of the logical positivists' activities in Europe; but given Austria's highly unfavorable circumstances (before and after the *Anschluss*), Kaufmann, in 1938, like many logical positivists, emigrated to the United States. After his arrival, he was invited to produce a similar work as his 1936 book, but instead, during the arrangement of the publishing process, he completed a new manuscript which, in 1944, became the *Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York, Oxford University Press).

Thus the new book was not just a translation of the older, but a polished and updated one, adapted to the new American environment: it was injected with John Dewey's pragmatism and logic of inquiry. The English-speaking world had to wait almost eighty years for a translation of the original book – but, as I will attempt to show, it was worth it for various reasons.



Felix Kaufmann, 1895-1949 (source: public domain)

A few words of contextualization may help the reader to appreciate Kaufmann's work both in its original and contemporary circumstances. The history of twentieth-century philosophy may be considered as the development of nineteenth century thought into the so-called "analytic" and "Continental" philosophies. Though there are numerous definitions of these types of philosophy most of them cannot be viewed as exclusive and comprehensive. A few names and debates shall suffice to motivate this distinction: Whereas hermeneutics, existentialism, phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty

are typical examples of the continental movement, logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, Rudolf Carnap, W. V. O. Quine, Saul Kripke, and David Lewis are examples of analytic philosophy.

These two traditions or canons are usually held to be separated by their *problem-horizons*, definitions of *key term and notions*, their *historical self-estimation*, their *goals and aims*, and their *scientific-philosophical character*. These features in themselves should not be expected to stir up more than some heated academic and institutional debates conducted in professional journals. But given the highly questionable and isolated character of much of contemporary philosophy, as practiced in university classrooms, any inside debate about its very legitimacy – and the debate between Continental and analytic philosophers has often tended to degenerate into existentially loaded disputes about who is a *real* philosopher – may come at the detriment of the discipline as a whole.

In recent decades, however, there has been a growing awareness of the hidden dangers behind the divide that characterizes the profession and people have started to work out different strategies to bury the hatchet. This could be done, in very general terms, as either a normative or a descriptive project. (i) One might attempt to show that even if there are few *prima facie* substantial connections between the traditions (besides both calling themselves ‘philosophy’) one *has to* work out such connections for the greater good. (ii) Or it might be shown that there is no need to work out such a faux rapprochement since the required connections and linkage *are already there*; scholars just need to dig deeper into the history of philosophy.

Occasionally, the second approach even tries to show that back in those days the aforementioned deep-seated divide within philosophy *as we know it today* either did not exist or surfaced in very different ways. The typical examples in this respect are the problem of non-existent entities (with the names of Bertrand Russell, Alexius Meinong, and Edmund Husserl), considerations of relativity, space and physics (with Husserl, Nicolai Hartmann, Ernst Cassirer, Hugo Dingler and Rudolf Carnap), the status and meanings of metaphysics (Martin Heidegger, Carnap), and the philosophy of mathematics (Husserl and Gottlob Frege). Finally, a lesser-known example is Oskar Becker’s ‘*Mathematische Existenz*,’ which appeared in Volume 8 of *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* (1927), founded by Husserl. Becker is interesting for two reasons. On the one hand, he tries to combine mathematical intuitionism with a vaguely Heideggerian philosophy. On the other hand, Becker’s work was published in the same volume as Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* and did not become as widely read and discussed as the later.

Interestingly a quite similar story can be told also about Felix Kaufmann. He published his *Das Unendliche in der Mathematik und seine Ausschaltung* in 1930 (the English translation, together with other articles, appeared in 1978 as *The Infinite in Mathematics – Logico-mathematical Writings*, as volume 9 of the Vienna Circle Collection): in it, he tried to give a systematic and comprehensive account of mathematical intuitionism from the viewpoint of Husserlian phenomenology. While Kaufmann’s work did not get much attention (though Carnap made an effort to debate Kaufmann’s ideas in his *Logical Syntax of Language*), it is still an important historical document. It was written and published the year before Kurt Gödel announced his incompleteness theorem, one of the cornerstones of twentieth-century (philosophy of) mathematics.

Thus, it was not only the nature of philosophy and metaphysics in general, and mathematics and physics in particular, which provided a common field for many philosophers during the first decades of twentieth century; the philosophy and methodology of social science, too, meant a shared interest for analytic and Continental thinkers. Kaufmann’s aforementioned *Methodenlehre der Sozialwissenschaften*, in this sense, may be just what one needs to turn to if one is looking for a documentation of that shared interest.

[Continue reading Part II for a review of Kaufmann’s Methodenlehre der Sozialwissenschaften](#)

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Intellectual History

Kaufmann's 'Methodenlehre der Sozialwissenschaften'

Posted by [brb](#) · July 2, 2016 ·  [Print This Article](#) · [Post a comment](#)

by **Ádám Tamás Tuboly**

Having been only a peripheral member of the Vienna Circle, Felix Kaufmann (1895-1949), philosopher of law, mathematics and social science, contributed knowledge and perspective beyond the empiricist ideal. His basic interest, and the influence of friends, directed him to another philosophical school, Husserlian phenomenology. This detailed and conscientious work led Kaufmann to his — unfortunately, and unjustly, neglected — *Methodenlehre der Sozialwissenschaften*, published recently, in an English translation, as *Theory and Method in the Social Sciences*. The English version consists of two parts: the first is an editorial introduction written by Helling, which runs to some 100 pages, the second is the actual translation of Kaufmann's book.



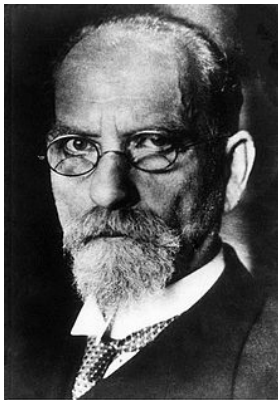
Felix Kaufmann, 1895-1949 (source: public domain)

The introduction aims to serve as a general account of Kaufmann's overall work, and in particular as a shorter contextualization of his 1936 book. The adjective 'shorter' is justified by the fact that it is only slightly longer than 30 pages: Helling discusses some biographical dates, Kaufmann's original context regarding the social sciences in the interwar Vienna-period, his position in the book, his relation to the Vienna Circle and Austrian economists (he participated in many discussion groups, among others, the Schlick Circle and the von Mises Group), and his position in the philosophy of law (Kaufmann's first doctorate was in law, while the second from philosophy). These topics are considered in the first half of the first part of the introduction (pp. 2-19); the second half (pp. 19-34) is devoted to Kaufmann's relation to Alfred Schütz and John Dewey, so the reader gains some insight into Kaufmann's American period, his intense correspondence with Dewey and some of his phenomenological context; unfortunately Schütz, whose

important role in Kaufmann's life is beyond doubt, received more attention than Husserl, who was one of the heroes in the 1936 book.

The second part of the introduction is a collection of interviews and recollections of friends, colleagues, students, and his family (pp. 34-94). Helling conducted interviews, amongst others, with Ernest Nagel, Friedrich August von Hayek, Ilse Schutz, and George Kaufmann. Though the interviews contain many repetitions, and they are quite hard to read given their oral style, the documentation, which runs to some 60 pages, is still a very important part of the book: it does a good job of offering the so-called emic, that is, inner perspective of the milieu in which Kaufmann worked in Vienna and later in the United States. To mention just one example: Helling did not ask whether Kaufmann *was* a logical positivist or a phenomenologist, but which of the two he was *considered to be* by his associates. We almost never get a straightforward answer, though.

The reason behind this might be that Kaufmann was not interested in labels, so he never cared about what he was called: a phenomenologist or a logical positivist (pp. 91-92). Tellingly, however, Kaufmann was not listed in the Vienna Circle's manifesto whether as a member, or as a close associate, though the latter he indeed was – it is known from Carnap diaries that they discussed Carnap's *Aufbau*, as well as Kaufmann's work in the philosophy of mathematics, and he often participated in the Circle's regular Thursday-meetings. On the other hand, Gustav Bergmann, in his recollections, claimed that Kaufmann was from the phenomenological school, and though Moritz Schlick, the informal leader of the Vienna Circle, was usually a patient and sober person, he occasionally showed signs of impatience and sometimes even interrupted the Circle's discussions when it was Kaufmann's turn to speak.



Edmund Husserl (ca. 1910s); source: Wikipedia

Kaufmann indeed was very close to the phenomenological movement. He held a course in the United States about Husserl's *Ideen* (p. 90), admired Husserl's work which he discussed with Schütz many times; furthermore, he wrote a piece for Husserl's 1940 *Festschrift* edited by the founder of the journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Marvin Farber. In that article, Kaufmann compares Husserlian phenomenology to logical positivism and gives a critique of the latter's atomistic epistemology. Even when he wrote a review of a collection of articles by Philipp Frank, the founder and director of the Institute for the Unity of Science in the United States, he complained about the neglect of the Husserlian insights in the works of logical positivists.

Most of the time, however, Kaufmann was regarded as a bridge-builder between phenomenology and logical positivism or, at the risk of sounding anachronistic, between Continental and analytic philosophy. And his major step toward the unity of philosophy was his 1936 book whose aim it was "first to attain a clear orientation with respect to the research goals and research procedures of the social sciences" (105). The social sciences and their methodology provided the subject matter and some clarificatory remarks are in order.

By the 'methodology of social sciences,' Kaufmann did not mean the actual, technical practices of a professional social scientist. He never talked about collecting empirical (social or economic) data and performing statistical analysis, about preparing objective questionnaires for interviews, about the nuts and

bolts of preparing anthropological fieldwork. "A methodology of the social sciences, as we understand it", Kaufmann claimed (p. 106), "has to set as its task a systematic analysis of types of problems and types of procedures." Therefore 'methodology' is a meta-investigation of the scientific field, a philosophical inquiry into those problems and practices that might be overlooked by social science practitioners: what do they count as the cornerstones (i.e. analytic, *a priori*) statements of their theories? what would they willing to revise (synthetic statements) in light of their experiences? Therefore, the majority of the *Methodenstreit's* content (the well-known debate about method in the early twentieth century German-speaking world) is embedded in the debate about the relation of natural to social sciences. The path could be cleared only if we clarify the nature of "mathematical and physical lawfulness" (108), and that is the point where the logical positivists' philosophy of mathematics and logic proved handy to Kaufmann.

Nonetheless, he was quite critical about some of the most important thoughts associated with logical positivism like the unity of science, physicalism, and the supposedly atomistic approach to experience and knowledge. Connecting the second and the third, Kaufmann summarizes the typical positivist position regarding the 'interpretation of statements about other human beings' as follows:

'All knowledge about one's fellow men arises by means of establishing links between observations of their body movements, and thus all control statements must be directed toward such observations, and accordingly the thesis, that sentences about one's fellow men have an added meaning that goes beyond that, is uncontrollable, unverifiable in principle, and thus unscientific (metaphysical).' (p. 215)

He claims that "[n]ot many words are required to refute this argument" (ibid.), but still provides some typical analogical arguments.

Some of the main strengths of the book lie in the last two chapters, where Kaufmann utilizes his methodological and philosophical achievements to reconstruct the logical structure of the scientific theories of law and economy (pp. 307-337 and 337-353). As a regular participant in economics meetings and as a law lecturer, Kaufmann was in a rather good position to attempt a synthesis between these fields and the approaches of logical positivism and phenomenology. He thus argued for the thesis that even if there is some important and essential difference between the natural and social sciences (somehow undermining the thesis of the unity of science, pp. 207-208), that does not mean that one should immediately draw the conclusion that social investigations are thereby unscientific in character.

A few words should be said about the recent edition itself. Though the editors did an excellent job on the translation, initiated first by John Viertel and Carolyn Fawcett (always, for example, providing the important original German notions and phrases) and though the introduction is likewise full of helpful material for the interested reader, some more care would have been desirable regarding the edition in general. Three things should be mentioned.

First, there is no detailed table of contents – what we have, instead, lists only the major parts (the introduction, Kaufmann's work, and the index); given that the original book has many subsections, it would have been useful to see them (and not just a photo of the original book cover, p. 103) in order to facilitate navigation. Secondly, the page breaks are handled in an unfortunate way – often they aren't there where one would expect them. Part 1 and Section 1 begin on the same page the Introduction ends on – with barely as much as a blank line in between. Thirdly, though Kaufmann mentions (p. 105) that the book has two indexes (for names and subjects), and there are indeed two of them in the original German version, yet in the English translation we find only the index of names, and not of subjects, which would, in fact, be quite important to keep track of the various approaches, ideas, and notions used by Kaufmann in the book. Given the richness of the content and the importance of the material, the reader rightly expects more editorial care and better production value.

Nonetheless, *Theory and Method in the Social Sciences* is both a very important historical source, a document of the early synthesis of what would later become Continental and analytic philosophy, and a useful text for anyone interested in the general philosophical-methodological problems of sciences, especially those of the social sciences in relation to the *Naturwissenschaften*.

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